STREET SPIRIT

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JUSTICE NEWS & HOMELESS BLUES IN THE BAY AREA

TINY HOUSES

A New Vision of Affordable Homes Arises in the East Bay

by Lydia Gans

Anyone who is aware of the lack of affordable housing and cares about the plight of more than one thousand homeless people in Berkeley, can't help but see the disconnect between their basic needs and the callous way that city officials respond.

The City of Berkeley provides some minimal funding for shelters that offer a few hours a night under a roof with a collection of strangers, toilets, showers and personal care facilities, but most of the support comes from churches and nonprofits.

The City's funding for storage lockers has been discontinued. Homeless people have to carry their possessions with them everywhere they go. The City Council made this situation even worse by passing new laws on December 1 that severely restrict their belongings to only two square feet of space and prohibit them from having a shopping cart in one place for more than one hour during the day.

Churches and other organizations provide meals and the homeless people have to walk to where food is offered. The City doesn't provide bus tickets.

As for housing, even if the mayor really leaned on the developers to create more affordable housing, what amounts to "affordable" is totally beyond the means of homeless people. It is obvious that the city neither cares nor is able to provide truly affordable housing for the poor people sleeping on the streets.

There is an alternative: *Tiny Houses*. And the people can make it happen. People are living in tiny houses in cities all over this country — in some areas, just a few individuals, while other places now have sizable communities. The houses can be easily constructed with a variety of materials, in different styles, and with all kinds of amenities. And they are affordable!

Recently, a coalition of homeless activists and supporters from various Berkeley organizations met at Youth Spirit Artworks to plan a Tiny Houses project.

Sally Hindman, director of YSA, told me how it started. "The meetings were initiated by Mike Lee who started talking about a Tiny House village. He's a good

See **Tiny Houses: A New Vision** *page 7*

A Tiny House in Portland, Oregon — a home on wheels. Photo credit: Tammy Strobel

Media War on Homeless People in San Francisco

San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee fights in the back rooms for developers' interests. Profit, not human needs, is guiding this administration.

by Carol Denney

It's always dangerous to assume too much about the significance of silence, from the U. S. Supreme Court or anybody else. Silence can be ominous, or full of speechless admiration.

But the U.S. Supreme Court's refusal to take up a case regarding developers' objections to mandates for affordable housing is at least a deep breath during a waterfall of cascading stories mischaracterizing housing issues and the people who get caught in the crossfire.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* has at least temporarily won its media war on poor and homeless people by using its reporters, columnists, and photographers to portray San Francisco city government, and Mayor Ed Lee in particular, as mistreated, misunderstood, underfunded, and helpless.

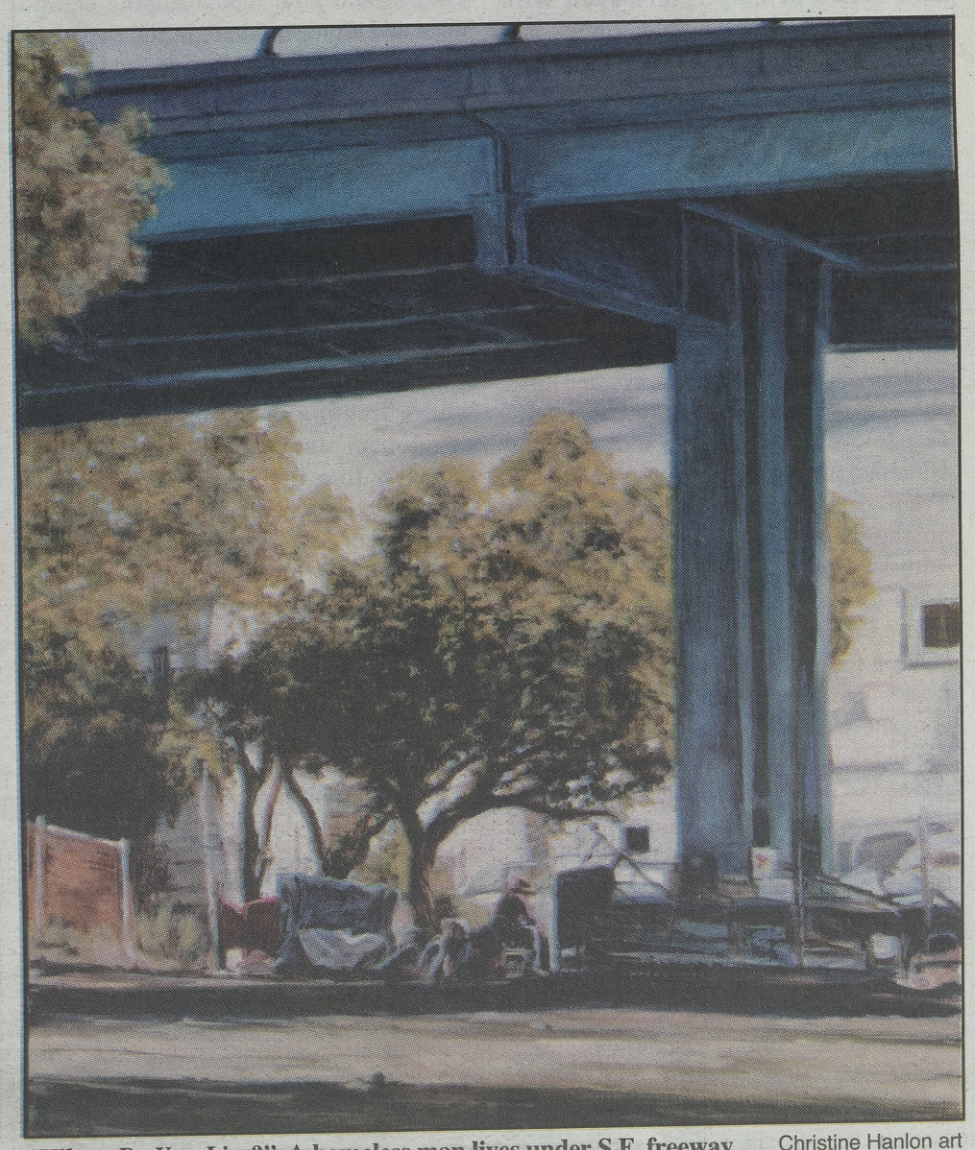
The mayor and the city are the underdog in most of these stories. People suffering the effects of the housing crisis are portrayed as just stubbornly unwilling to be part of the one percent's good fortune.

It was barely mentioned in the *Chronicle* stories that the Pier 80 proposed alternative to the community of tents under Division Street's overpass didn't have enough capacity for even that particular tent community, let alone all of San Francisco's population of people in need.

Despite the Pier 80 tents being miles from town, despite the barbed wire that evokes concentration camp analogies, these numbers matter, especially after watching the city spend nearly five million dollars of public money on nine days of pre-Super Bowl parties in a city that didn't even host the game.

People living in tents under the Division Street overpass paid for those parties, too, including the police officers who kept protesters away from the festivities. But night after night, television cam-

See **Media War on Homeless People** *page 2*



"Where Do You Live?" **A homeless man lives under S.F. freeway.** Christine Hanlon art

Day of Reckoning for Right to Sleep in Santa Cruz

by Steve Pleich

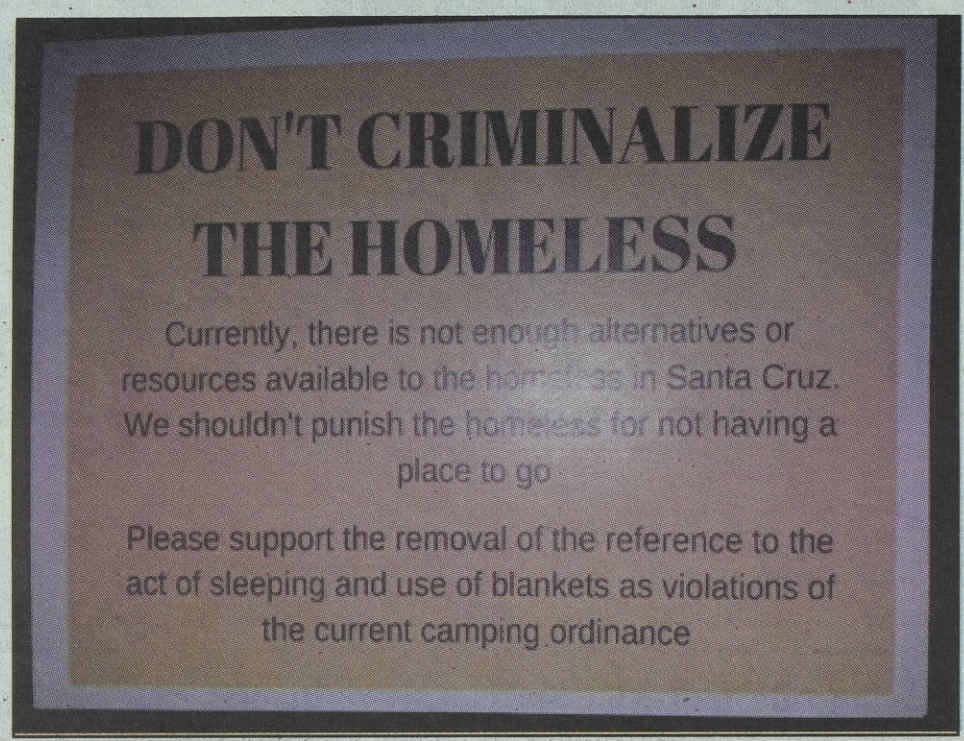
As has been previously reported here ("Santa Cruz Activists Join Together to Defend the Right to Sleep," *Street Spirit*, February 2016), for several weeks a working group has been meeting to strategize ways to move forward in support of the Right to Sleep in Santa Cruz. The group has now introduced an amendment to Section 6.36.010 of the Municipal Code (Camping) to remove references to the act of sleeping and the use of blankets.

The proposed amendment will be heard by the Santa Cruz City Council on March 8. While the amendment does eliminate three entire sleep-related subsections of 6.36.010, including reference to vehicle sleeping, local activists understand that the amendment is far from perfect.

Says longtime local activist Steve Schnaar, "I have continued to be troubled by a provision in one of our City's ordinances — MC Section 6.36.010(a) — that penalizes people who have no place else to go for falling asleep or covering up with a blanket while being outside late at night or early in the morning. This is not a 'smart solution' by any stretch of the imagination."

Other activists have been more vocal about the lack of a broader revision of the ordinance, which has served as the primary vehicle for criminalizing people experiencing homelessness in Santa Cruz.

Says David Roknich of Indy Radio, "This amendment shouldn't be necessary except for the narrow-minded bigotry and greed of some overly privileged individuals who have owned the government of a city that still tries to lay claim to a 'progressive' legacy. The camping ban should simply be made void, and striking it down should happen on humanitarian grounds, not because the same malefactors finally realize they've hurt their own economic interests with their stupidity and greed. This is not very diplomatic, but eventually the truth will out."



It is our hope that this amendment in support of the Right to Sleep can be a first step in a progressive decriminalization of homelessness in Santa Cruz. It is a call to conscience for the entire community.

Other activists including Robert Norse, founder of HUFF (Homeless United for Friendship and Freedom), have been even more critical. Norse is calling for a much more sweeping and substantive revision of the camping/sleeping ban to include homeless services monitoring and nightly reporting of available shelter space and a moratorium on enforcement when no shelter space is available.

Norse says, "The entire minefield of anti-homeless laws needs to be bulldozed and selective enforcement abandoned."

Although I do not disagree with the criticism, I also know that "politics is the art of the possible." The proposed amendment addresses an extremely visceral and highly politicized issue in our community. It is the hope of the working group that this amendment can be a first step in a progressive decriminalization of homelessness in Santa Cruz.

If the community can support the Right to Sleep, the next questions about where and how this right can be exercised can be addressed and answered. Says homeless and social justice activist Becky Johnson, "We have been criminalizing people experiencing homelessness in Santa Cruz for decades. Even one small step toward decriminalization would be historic. Our homeless brothers and sisters have been waiting a long time for this day."

As mentioned, the proposed amendment is agendized for council consideration on March 8, although it is uncertain at this time whether it will be considered at an afternoon or evening session. Until then, efforts will continue to actively lobby business and community groups in support of the proposal as sound economic and public policy, as well as a call to conscience for the entire community.

The working group asks everyone who supports the Right to Sleep in Santa Cruz to email the Santa Cruz City Council at citycouncil [at] cityofsantacruz.com and to come to the council session on March 8 and speak in favor of the proposed amendment. There is also a change.org petition supporters are urged to sign.

Steve Pleich is an advocate for decriminalization of people experiencing homelessness and a supporter of the Right to Rest.

Media War on Homeless People in S.F.

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eras hovered around Division Street poised for fresh versions of the classic shots: interviews with people who "refuse" shelter, complaints from merchants and homeowners about trash, and city workers handing out eviction notices and offers of help interwoven with threats of tickets, warrants, intrusion, jail.

Few are more knowledgeable than people with no housing options what it means when the bright vests of city workers show up nearby. Many people pack and leave at the whisper of any official intervention, if they're able. The community of cooperation disperses to reinvent itself somewhere beyond the media spotlight.

It works, if you believe the *Chronicle's* assessment of its readers' applause for its own coverage. Tent giveaways and food sharing is described as "misguided," despite even city officials, such as Kelly Hiramoto of the city's Homeless Outreach Team, describing her team as "bouncing among the whims of department heads, with strategies and priorities changing week to week." And predictably, a tech start-up's app was happily highlighted: a "Queen for a Day" approach to homelessness where people in need are invited to compete with each other to coax sympathy and dollars from an essentially passive public. No pesky public policy here!

Any city can use its camping laws, its public health laws, or no laws at all to disperse a collection of tents. But what most people would acknowledge if pressed is that most neighborhoods would share the same troubles conventional in any tent community within days (if not hours) if the garbage services, water and power services, and sewage services were shut off. Garbage would pile up, attracting vermin. Waste, even in tight containers, would smell. Even the most fastidious among us would start to look rumpled.

Neighbors would quickly form committees of people to ferry waste back and forth to the nearest available facility, as people in tent communities often do. They would pool their camping equipment and arrange shared meals, as people in tent communities often do, and would try their best to work cooperatively.

It is no accident that this exhausting, time-consuming, and heroic work which all tent communities exhibit was not highlighted by the *San Francisco Chronicle* in favor of typical tropes which scapegoat the poor.

San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee appears bent on noodling around with the usual "streamlined" services and "new" models while fighting in the back rooms for developers' interests, while listening uneasily to a growing public outcry against luxury apartments and AirB&B-style conversions. Even the tech workers appreciate that profit, not human needs, is guiding this administration.

The rights of cities to require developers to include affordable housing may or may not be upheld by a future U.S. Supreme Court, given that a crucial fifth vote may conceivably come from a Supreme Court justice nominated and affirmed by a Republican president and a Republican-dominated Congress.

But for the present, the Supreme Court's silence means that yes, a city can in fact require that developers' proposals address essential community needs for open space, for historic preservation, for transportation issues — and yes, for appropriate housing to address the housing crisis.

Gimme Some Truth

Compiled by Daniel McMullan

"I've had enough of reading things by neurotic psychotic pigheaded politicians. All I want is the truth, just gimme some truth."
— *John Lennon*

TRUTH

"A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes." — *Mark Twain*

"The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off." — *Joe Klaas*

"Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect he ceases to love." — *Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov*

JUSTICE

"There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest." — *Elie Wiesel*

"Let the first act of every morning be to make the following resolve for the day:
- I shall not fear anyone on Earth.
- I shall fear only God.
- I shall not bear ill will toward anyone.
- I shall not submit to injustice from anyone.
- I shall conquer untruth by truth. And in resisting untruth, I shall put up with all suffering."

— *Mahatma Gandhi*

"As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways in which I could respond to my situation — either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course." — *Martin Luther King Jr.*

AND THE AMERICAN WAY

"Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires." — *Ronald White*

"I've always resented the smug statements of politicians, media commentators, corporate executives who talked of how, in America, if you worked hard you would become rich. The meaning of that was if you were poor it was because you hadn't worked hard enough. I knew this was a lie, about my father and millions of others, men and women who worked harder than anyone, harder than financiers and politicians, harder than anybody if you accept that when you work at an unpleasant job that makes it very hard work indeed." — *Howard Zinn*

"People are continually pointing out to me the wretchedness of white people in order to console me for the wretchedness of blacks. But an itemized account of the American failure does not console me and it should not console anyone else. That hundreds of thousands of white people are living, in effect, no better than the "niggers" is not a fact to be regarded with complacency. The social and moral bankruptcy suggested by this fact is of the bitterest, most terrifying kind." — *James Baldwin, Nobody Know My Name*

"America is not so much a nightmare as a non-dream. The American non-dream is precisely a move to wipe the dream out of existence. The dream is a spontaneous happening and therefore dangerous to a control system set up by the non-dreamers." — *William S. Burroughs*

The Struggle for Renter Protections in Richmond

by Lynda Carson

"Richmond's rents, like rents all across the Bay Area, are rising sky high, causing much hardship and displacement. It's very important to slow down this tide of rising rents. We don't want outrageously high rent increases to continue, such that more and more struggling renters are forced out of our city." — Gayle McLaughlin, Richmond City Council

On February 23, the Fair and Affordable Richmond Coalition, a united group of renters, homeowners, organizations, local elected officials, community activists and labor, filed a proposed ballot measure to protect Richmond's tenants against unjust evictions and unfair rent increases.

The Richmond City Clerk has 15 days to write a title and summary for the Initiative. The Coalition will have until June to gather 4,198 signatures to place the measure on the November ballot. The Fair and Affordable Richmond Coalition is made up of community members including Tenants Together, Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), Richmond Progressive Alliance, SEIU 1021, AFSCME Local 3299 and the California Nurses Association.

Richmond City Councilmember Gayle McLaughlin said, "Richmond's rents, like rents all across the Bay Area, are rising sky high, causing much hardship and displacement. It's very important to slow down this tide of rising rents.

"That is why we are working to put our Richmond Fair Rent, Just Cause for Eviction and Homeowner Protections Ordinance on the November ballot. Richmond is home to a wonderfully diverse, mixed-income community, and we want to keep that diversity and mixture of incomes. We don't want outrageously high rent increases to continue, such that more and more struggling renters are forced out of our city.

"Our ordinance allows 100 percent CPI increases. This is a reasonable increase for landlords. Our renters need protection, and as an elected official committed to helping those most in need in our community, I am proud to be involved in this important effort."

Claudia Jimenez, a homeowner in Richmond who is a community organizer with the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA), said, "The Richmond City Council passed some renter protections including rent control, and just cause eviction protections that were supposed to go into effect last year to protect Richmond renters. However, the California Apartment Association (CAA) spent a lot of money to hire people who gathered enough signatures for a petition that blocked the renter protections from going into effect.

"Some of the signature gatherers came to my door and lied to me, and tried to trick me into signing the petition. They said that the petition will strengthen renter protections in Richmond, when it actually was a petition meant to block renter protections from going into effect.

"The best way for us to protect Richmond renters from increasingly high rents and unjust evictions is to bring this ballot measure to the voters. As a homeowner in Richmond since 2009, I support this renter protection ordinance because it will help to stabilize the community. Half of the population in Richmond are renters, and half of them or more pay more than 30 percent of their income for rent. I would hate to see my neighbors have to move and be forced out of their housing because they do not have any protection as renters."

According to a release from the Fair and Affordable Richmond Coalition, "The proposed ballot measure would establish a rent board that would set annual limits on rent increases for the City of Richmond, as well as provide a process for tenants to appeal rent increases. Richmond renters, living in units built before 1995, would be protected from outrageous increases in rent and evictions for reasons that are without cause. Additionally, the ordinance would cap rent increases at 1 percent to 3 percent a year, in addition to relocation compensation for renters that have been evicted unjustly."

"A recent poll commissioned by Fair and Affordable Richmond shows that nearly two thirds of voters would vote today to enact rent control and just cause eviction protections. Richmond voters understood that similar limits on evictions and unreasonable rent increases have helped to prevent thousands of middle-class and low-income people from losing their homes, making communities safer and more stable for everyone, and they think the City of Richmond should have such protections."

Indeed, in the recent past, the California Apartment Association (CAA) has repeatedly meddled in the affairs of the City of Richmond when the council considered passing renter protections to stabilize its communities. The CAA managed to frighten landlords and realtors into opposing any reasonable renter protections in Richmond, and they targeted the Mayor and City Councilmembers in the effort to block renter protections from going into effect. When all of their efforts failed and the City Council passed an ordinance last August that included rent control and just cause eviction protections, the CAA went on the attack again and hired a consultant to come up with a petition that would block renter protections from going into effect.

Eventually, the CAA even ended up bragging about the efforts to prevent renter protections from going into effect. Many Richmond residents claimed that the CAA effort was down and dirty, and many reported being tricked into signing the petition by devious signature gatherers who were paid anywhere from $12.50 to $20.00 per signature, according to numerous reports. Residents said signature gatherers lied to people by telling them that the petition made rent control stronger, or kept rents from increasing, according to testimony from renters and media reports.

It was big money that stole renter protections in Richmond, and the CAA was deeply involved in the scheme to deprive renters of needed protections. Recently, the CAA has also been meddling in the affairs of other cities in Northern California, including the City of Alameda, in an effort to block renter protections.

In Santa Rosa, when the City Council was considering passing measures to protect renters from massive rent increases and unjust no-cause evictions, the CAA, the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce and other organizations went into high gear to oppose renter protections.

They spent a small fortune to target the City Council in an effort to block any renter protections, and even made the outrageous claim that renters were against the proposed protections. The multi-billion-dollar housing and real estate industry ran a slick campaign in Santa Rosa and the council eventually lacked enough votes to pass any renter protections.

Back in 2002, there was a huge struggle in Oakland in a campaign to protect renters with a just cause eviction protection ordinance that went into effect, and the community effort has resulted in protecting thousands of renters from unjust no-cause evictions.

In this struggle, community members raised around $80,000 to fund the just cause campaign to bring it to the voters, and the landlord/real estate members that opposed the renter protections spent around $500,000 to defeat the measure. In the end, the supporters of just cause eviction protections won with a narrow victory of less than 3,000 votes.

Rent control has been a huge success in protecting renters and stabilizing communities in other cities in California, and just cause eviction protections have also been a big success in protecting renters in numerous cities.

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Street Spirit

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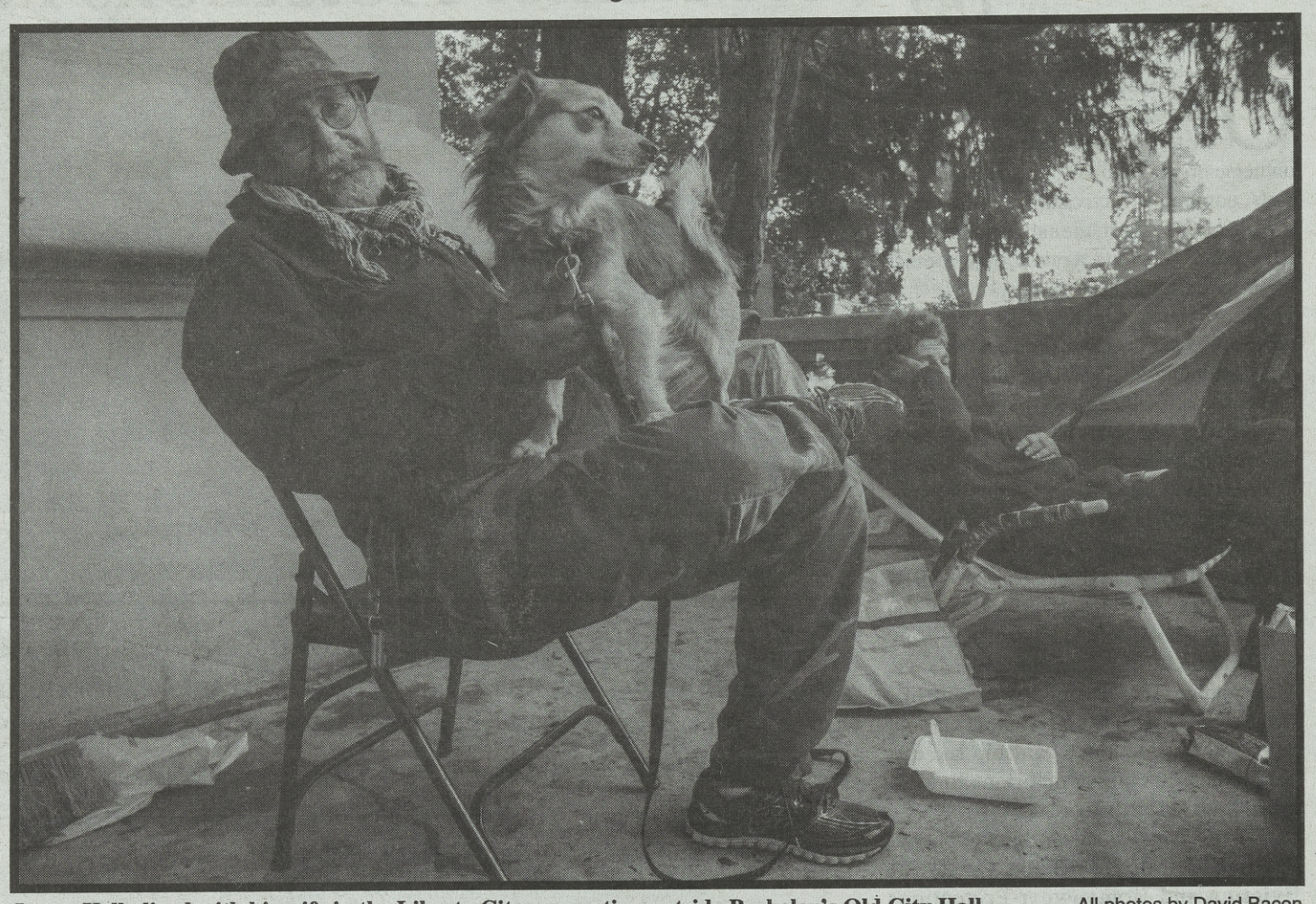
Intentional Homeless Community Evolves in Berkeley

Business owners and residents grow uneasy when homeless people organize and use the creative tactics of the labor and civil rights movements. Homeless people did just that by organizing at Liberty City and the Post Office.



James Kelly lived with his wife in the Liberty City occupation outside Berkeley's Old City Hall

All photos by David Bacon

by David Bacon

Michael Lee started living on the streets of San Francisco last May. He had traveled to the city from Las Vegas to seek medical treatment. When he arrived, he searched for cheap, temporary housing in some of San Francisco's most affordable neighborhoods, but he had seriously underestimated the cost of living in the nation's most expensive city.

"I was under the impression the rent was $300 a month, and I brought the resources for sixty days," he said in an interview. "I was going to go back to Las Vegas afterwards and go back to work. But the first place I walked into, they told me it was $300 a week. The next was $400 a week, and then $500. People were laughing at me — $300 a week is actually cheap on Skid Row. So I wound up living on the streets."

Lee soon heard of a large encampment in Berkeley that homeless activists had set up to protest the US Postal Service's plan to sell Berkeley's historic downtown post office building. So he moved across the bay and quickly became a leader of the Berkeley camp. He advocated for a plan to transform the old post office building into a community resource: "A homeless contact center run by homeless people," he said.

"Why [were] homeless people the main defenders?" Lee asked rhetorically, referring to the post office. "Without community resources we can't get a hand up. There's just no place to go. This is where we live, unfortunately — on the sidewalks. We don't want to live in a community where private developers, the One Percenters, have everything."

"We're not going to be homeless forever," Lee continued. "Eventually, we will recover from homelessness because we're pretty determined individuals. That's something that people with houses truly need to understand. We are going to be rejoining the community."

After a federal judge granted the City of Berkeley a temporary restraining order against the US Postal Service's planned sale of the downtown post office, the USPS announced that it was shelving its plans to sell the building.

Several months later, some of the people in the post office camp set up a larger homeless encampment, which became known as "Liberty City" or "Liberty Village." They set this camp up a block away, on the lawn in front of Old City Hall, to protest a new City Council plan to establish stricter rules targeting homeless people.

During the holidays, Berkeley cleared out Liberty City, and the homeless people who had been part of it scattered to other spots in the city and to locations throughout the Bay Area. The post office camp, now more than 400 days old, still remains.

Over the years, Berkeley, like most liberal communities, has been comfortable with the idea of the homeless being victims. But many Berkeley residents and business owners grow uneasy when homeless people organize and use the creative tactics of the labor and civil rights movements.

Last year, Berkeley's homeless people did just that. They created what they called "intentional communities," or "occupations," like Liberty City and the post office camp, not just as a protest tactic, but also as places where they could gain more control over their lives and implement their own ideas for dealing with homelessness.

Many drew on previous experience in other movements. "A lot of us are older activists," Lee explained. "Our ideas come out of the 1960s and even before, from the 1930s. Homeless people have always formed communities, whether we were considered hoboes or homeless people or just bums. Hobo jungles were intentional communities too, based on an unconscious understanding of the need for mutual aid and voluntary cooperation."

"People police themselves," he said in an interview while Liberty City was still operating. "I see people out there in the middle of the night with flashlights picking up trash. I see them chase off anti-social elements. If you want to talk about the solution to homelessness, all you have to do is walk down to Berkeley City Hall, and the post office. Is it a perfect solution? No. Housing is the permanent solution to homelessness. But this is a helluva good start."

City Councilmember Jesse Arreguin, who is running for mayor this year, said that he thinks the residents of Liberty City did a good job of keeping it safe and well-run. "Liberty City shows that homeless people can create a community," he said. But he cautioned that such communities can't "be completely removed from the city. There should be an ongoing city presence, that might include homeless outreach staff, mental health workers, or others."

Nearly everyone agrees that the answer to homelessness is permanent housing. But the state and federal governments do not provide the funding needed to build permanent housing for homeless people. In fact, over the decades, national policies have eliminated housing for poor people and cost hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Local governments provide homeless shelters and services, but they are unable to meet the needs of the huge number of people living on the streets because of a lack of money. Berkeley alone has 1,200 homeless residents, according to city officials. Further, many homeless people don't like shelters because they can't bring their pets, or because most shelters require you to be inside by a certain hour in the evening and to leave during the day.

As a result, some cities, including Portland and Seattle, have approved the creation of tent cities as an alternative form of temporary housing for homeless people. And Berkeley's experience with Liberty City revealed that a tent city has the potential to work in the East Bay as well.

Mike Zint is a leader of the homeless protests at the Post Office and Liberty City.

But while Berkeley views itself as a progressive community, it remains to be seen whether city officials would ever approve a tent city plan. After all, the Berkeley City Council voted on December 1 to greenlight the city's crackdown on the homeless.

Mike Zint has been homeless since 2000. For many years, he lived out of his car, moving from town to town. He said that during the Occupy movement several years ago, he was in San Francisco when "police sent me to Occupy, thinking that I must be a drug addict. But they made a big mistake, because I began organizing."

Zint said that after San Francisco police "crushed" the Occupy encampment, he and other homeless activists staged a series of protests, including one during the America's Cup yacht race. Then they set up an "Occupy Staples" protest in San Francisco to demonstrate against Staples' decision to open postal kiosks, which activists viewed as a further "privatization of the post office," he said.

Zint said that, over the years, San Francisco has hardened its stance against marginalized people, like the homeless. Politicians "pass laws to get the homeless out of sight of the businesses, so shoppers don't see them," he said. "San Francisco has an image as a world class city, but there are no bathrooms. There are no shower facilities. They say there are only a few thousand homeless when there are twice as many. With the shuffle going on they just move them. One day this street looks good because they've cleared people out, and then they get rid of them somewhere else."

Eventually, Zint and other demonstrators moved the San Francisco demonstration in front of Staples to the store in Berkeley. Then, "last year, we learned the post office was going to sell the main building downtown. So we removed everything from Staples, and took the corner of the post office instead," he said. "We put the occupation right there."

"Over the last year, we've been organizing the homeless into an actual movement," he continued. "Our intention has always been to occupy a much larger piece of property, and get one of the Bay Area cities to allow homeless people to take care of themselves. Berkeley, because of its reputation, is a good place to do this. People here are genuine and care. The university and high school students are incredible. The teachers are very good. It's night and day, compared to San Francisco."

At first, fighting the Postal Service brought homeless people together with city authorities in a loose-knit coalition in Berkeley that included Mayor Tom Bates, Councilmember Linda Maio, and local legal and political activists. While rallies

See **Berkeley's Intentional Homeless** *page 5*

Berkeley's Intentional Homeless Community

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and court actions sought to block the sale of the post office building, the encampment on the post office steps became a constant presence and visible evidence of resistance.

Within the encampment, homeless people developed their own community. They organized themselves and worked together. They made decisions collectively. And they developed their own ideas about what causes homelessness, and devised short-term and long-term solutions to it.

Last fall, while Liberty City was still operating, Lee said, "People in the community came out and looked at us, and maybe at first they thought, 'Look at the poor homeless people.' But now we're creating the new world in the shell of the old. What we're doing in terms of mutual aid and cooperation can be applied anywhere. They're going to have to finally see that organizing is the solution to homelessness."

Paul Kealoha Blake, who is director of the East Bay Media Center on Addison Street and a business owner sympathetic to the homeless, said residents of Liberty City maintained order in their camp. "I think that Liberty Village and its organizers did an excellent job of setting standards of no drugs and alcohol," he said.

But the coalition of homeless activists and city politicians didn't last beyond the post office battle. Several months after the Postal Service announced that it no longer planned to sell the building, Bates and Maio brought the homeless-crackdown ordinance, sought by the Downtown Business Association, before the council.

The new ordinance prohibits people from lying in planter beds, tying possessions to poles or trees or keeping them within two feet of a tree well or planter, taking up more than two square feet of space with belongings, and keeping a shopping cart in one place for more than an hour during the day. It also further penalizes urinating and defecating in public, which are already against the law.

Both Blake and Arreguin, who voted against the new ordinance, believe that homelessness has become an overly polarized issue in Berkeley, rather than one in which different parts of the community find common ground. "The business community would like to see people not camping out in doorways," Arreguin noted. "Business people want a long-term solution. Homeless people did a good job on changing perceptions of homelessness at Liberty City. They set ground rules and enforced them. They had a process for that, where everybody participated in the meetings."

Before Berkeley cleared out Liberty City, Zint said that he and other homeless activists were attempting to develop "an actual city through a bunch of homeless people coming together. We have a community here. And if we can pull it off properly here, we can use this as a model to be done all over. They'll begin listening to our message, and that is that we should be able to take care of ourselves."

Berkeley is not the only community where homeless people have proposed running their own encampments. A homeless protest and occupation in Portland last year evolved into Dignity Village, which now exists with the city's approval. Portland, in fact, is debating the creation of new, similar encampments.

The Seattle City Council has already approved three new tent cities, each housing one hundred residents, although they will be run by service providers, rather than the homeless themselves. They're estimated to cost $200,000 per year in trash collection and portable toilets, but that cost is less than a traditional shelter.

A young woman with her dog in the Liberty City occupation outside the old Berkeley City Hall. All photos by David Bacon

In Honolulu, which has also passed multiple ordinances cracking down on sitting and sleeping in public, Mayor Kirk Caldwell has set up a new homeless camp that is made up of shipping containers.

Berkeley also had an earlier experience with a homeless camp, called Rainbow Village, in what is now Cesar Chavez Park at the marina. Mostly, it consisted of an area where people could park and live in their cars. After an incident in which someone was killed, however, the city closed it down.

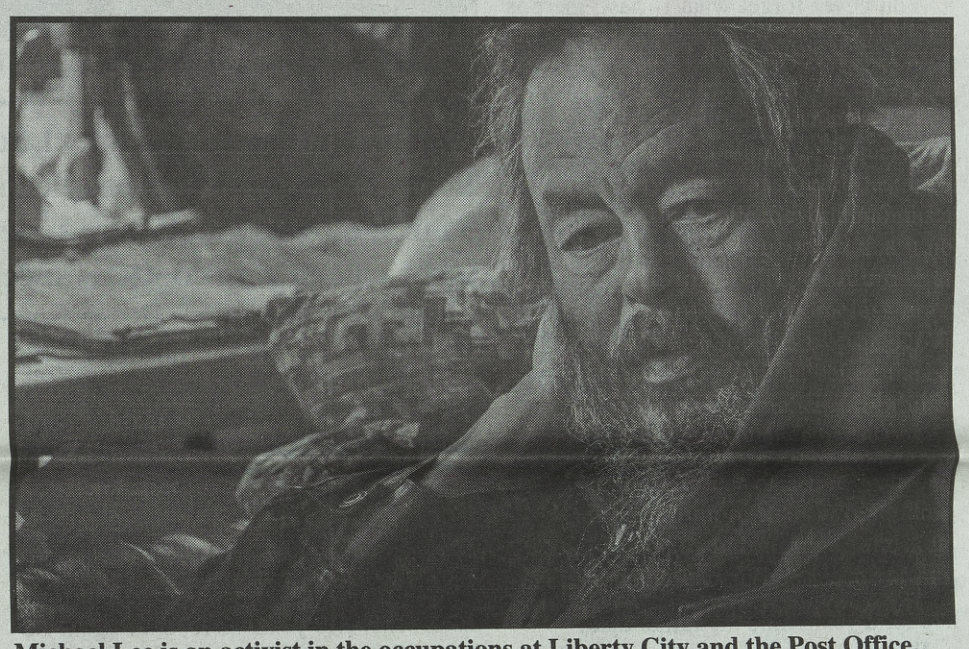
"But I do not believe that the Rainbow Village should be evaluated solely on that tragedy," Blake cautioned. "A close and collaborative relationship between homeless leadership and the City of Berkeley can work and was in fact working at Liberty City."

One big question is where such a camp could be located in Berkeley. Rainbow Village was far from transit and services needed by homeless people. Arreguin said, however, that when Liberty City was operating in downtown, his office got complaints from neighbors living near the old City Hall.

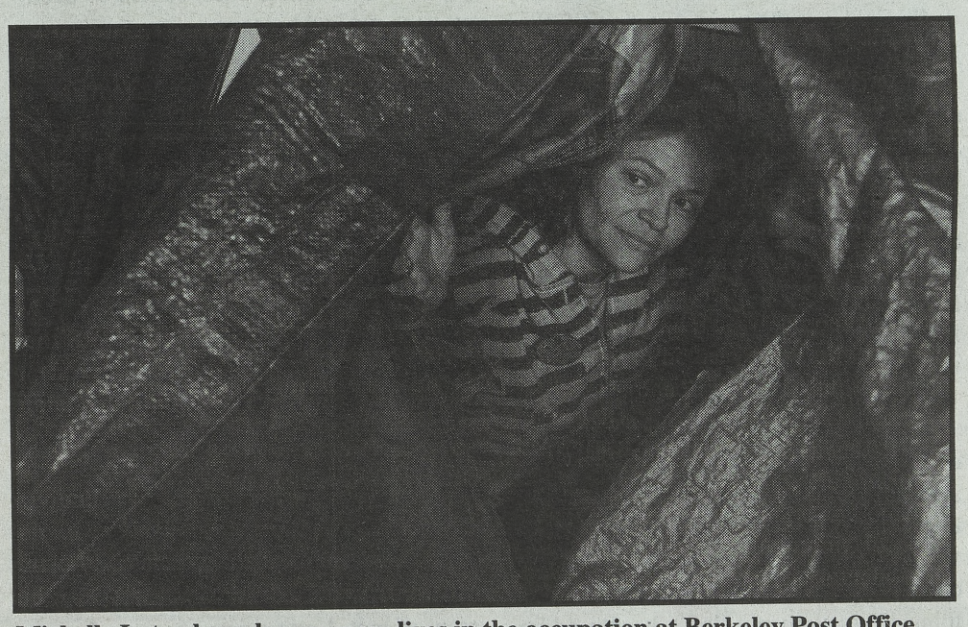
"The camp had a spillover of people who were attracted to it and who engaged in inappropriate behavior," he said. "Not everyone respects our laws, and the perception of homeless people is often based on those examples. But we need to be sensitive to the concerns of neighbors."

For their part, however, most homeless people in Berkeley complain that they are demonized, and they established Liberty City partly in response. Many homeless people are also veterans, and have to reconcile the irony of having fought in the country's military, only to later find themselves social outcasts in a nation they had defended. "I spent ten years in the Navy upholding the Constitution, from 1979 to 1989," said James Kelly, a former resident of Liberty City. "I believe a person should not have to worry day-to-day where they're going to lay their head or get their next meal. That should just be a given."

Andre Cameron, another Liberty City resident, said his experience in Berkeley at the encampment was dramatically different from the time he spent in Los Angeles, the last city he lived in. "In LA, they don't have anything like this. They have Skid Row," he said. "A huge amount of people live on the street in downtown LA. There's no help for them. Here, there's a community. I feel the love here. I feel that here in Berkeley there's at least some hope. There are people here that care. If I had to choose to be homeless anyplace in the world, it would be here in Berkeley.



Michael Lee is an activist in the occupations at Liberty City and the Post Office.



Michelle Lot, a homeless woman, lives in the occupation at Berkeley Post Office.

"It's embarrassing, if you've never been homeless," he continued. "People in LA look at homeless people like a plague. Here, there's more of an acceptance of this subculture of homeless people. I think it's a tribute in some small cultural way to the community as a whole. I've never gotten that sense anywhere else."

Ultimately, Arreguin said, the city needs to hear from the homeless themselves and treat them as normal members of the body politic. "When the city passed a law last year that criminalizes homelessness, there was no conversation about what the homeless need, and the city didn't have any input from them. But it can be done," he said. "We do have a crisis, and all options should be on the table. Berkeley should consider a temporary encampment until we have more permanent housing. People need a place to go."

Cameron added, "They should have a place, a park, some sort of a space where people can set up tents, and live peacefully, with porta potties and showers and trash pickup, and that's organized. We need a place for people to be human — eat, sleep, utilize restrooms. That need doesn't stop because of a law."

And, warns Lee, "Homeless people can vote."

See David Bacon's blog, The Reality Check http://davidbaconrealitycheck.blogspot.com

In the 38th Greater Bay Area Journalism Awards David Bacon won first-place in the photo series category for his August 6, 2014 cover story for the *East Bay Express*, "Living on the Streets of Oakland," a photo essay.

Personal Reflections on Homelessness in Oakland

I know what it means to lose huge chunks of life in one sweep. After a while, the past gets heavy and you start leaving pieces of yourself behind in garages, garbage bins and on pavements.

A mule-drawn wagon bears the casket of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. on his funeral procession in Atlanta, April 9, 1968.

Martin Luther King said, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" If people know their history, then Martin Luther King's Poor People's March on Washington, completed after his death, has not resulted in an American society where all citizens matter, especially black men, the majority of men seen on Oakland streets.

by Wanda Sabir

When I think about homelessness, I don't know, it has happened to me so many times from childhood to the present. I am not immune, but I certainly have a higher tolerance and compassion than those who work with such populations without a clue as to what it means to have all of your possessions in storage and only what you can fit into a suitcase or bags with you at any time.

I know what it means to lose huge chunks of life in one sweep. After a while, the past gets heavy and you start leaving pieces of yourself behind in garages, garbage bins and on pavements.

You never forget what is past; there is regret that you can't carry it forward. There is no space, the new home is smaller, and you don't have enough money for a storage space, or the storage space was inadequate and your belongings were ruined by water damage, rodents, mold.

Sometimes you get bullied into letting the sentiments go. You are called a hoarder. Ten years with five storage spaces is a lot of money, but when your personal space — "home" — is in limbo, there is something steadying about having a spot, even if it is a glorified garage.

I remember when my brother slept in his storage space when he couldn't afford rent and also pay for my father's 24-hour in-home support care. He decided I would keep my apartment because I had two kids, and he would not have anywhere to live for a year while my father died.

What choices we make, right? My dad's final months were sweet and full of love because of my brother's sacrifice.

While a child, my father's income was unstable, so we would end up in motels in San Francisco a lot. I don't remember how old I was when it happened the first time. I just remember being somewhere by the Cow Palace and not feeling terribly traumatized. I don't remember meals, but I don't remember being hungry. I don't know where our dogs were either. I went to school each day and before I knew it, we were in a house again.

I think we were evicted. We were evicted quite a few times. My mother always had a job, and so we had income to pay for the motels. I don't know why, if we could pay for a motel, why we couldn't pay rent. Perhaps it had something to do with my dad's heroin addiction or alcoholism.

When I got married, and moved to Oakland, I assumed temporary housing or housing instability would be a thing of the past, but the evictions continued, one after another. I recall sitting up all night in a really nasty hotel on MacArthur Boulevard in January 1979.

Just after my older daughter was born at Alta Bates Hospital, we were evicted from our Alcatraz Avenue apartment. We'd paid our rent to an attorney and he didn't give it to the property managers, so we were out on the streets.

The sheets at the motel were dingy and the pillows inside the thin pillow cases were black. I couldn't lay my newborn baby on that nasty bed. I hadn't even heard of bedbugs. My brother-in-law Rahim rescued us the next day and we went to live in his apartment on 14th Avenue by Highland Hospital for a month or two. He stayed with friends until there were no more sofas to crash on and then we had to go.

We had a VW camper and moved into a better motel for a couple of months, while we waited for the apartment on 65th Avenue and MacArthur to become available. After two years there, once again we had to move. The owner wanted to occupy it, so we had to leave.

That move took us to High Street where we stayed in Colonial Apartments or we moved to Shafter or to Richmond or to Pleasant Hill or to Fremont or Harmon Avenue, back in Oakland. We moved so much we rented our furniture. Every year, or more often than that, we were moving.

We had a camper and would go to the regional parks to relax away from the motels. Eviction followed eviction; or if we weren't evicted, we moved just before we had to. There was always an urgency. I hate moving fast. You forget things and lose things you can never get back.

I remember thinking, after I was divorced, that I would not move again for a long time. And I didn't move until — guess what? I was evicted, but not for nonpayment of rent. I was evicted because I made too much money and the manager didn't like me. She didn't like anyone with more education than she had.

I was in government-subsidized housing. I knew the drill: more money meant rental increases, but no one would take my case or help me, from ACORN to Berkeley Community Law to City Councilperson Natalie Bayton. My daughter and I were homeless for almost year after that. I went to work daily at Contra Costa College and Laney College and Chabot College. My younger daughter went to school, her first year at the California College of Arts and Crafts. It was hard, but perhaps the fact that she is an artist gave her an outlet for her worries.

We were so happy to find the 14th Avenue Apartment. I slept on the floor for a year, and took the bus to work. (My car had stopped running). We didn't have any furniture. Well, my daughter had a bed. She bought me a bed for my birthday present, a sofa bed.

We moved from there into a house we purchased for too much money. We lost about $200,000 in a quick sale after being burglarized three years ago this year. People were buying houses for half the price of ours. If there are any lessons here, one is that when I needed help the first time, all the agencies I knew told me they could not help me because I made too much money. The Oakland City Council persons I contacted whom I had worked with in developing housing stock in West Oakland could not find any property for me to rent or purchase.

There were no lawyers who could help me, though they had helped others I'd referred to them over the years. Something was fishy, but I left, and turned in the keys so I had nowhere to return. I even put my dilemma in writing and published it, still no help.

So I lost my community. I loved Oak Center Apartments and the Oak Center neighborhood. Unlike other HUD properties, like the one where my brother lives in San Francisco, it was not converted into a co-op where we could own our units (although we talked about it).

I had to move to East Oakland where I knew no one, and then when I bought the house, I still knew no one. Well I met a few people, drug dealers who were soon killed around the corner in shootouts on Seminary. Other people on my block had so many bars around their doors I could not see them, let alone have a relationship with them.

I am happy where I am now. I live alone for the first time in my life. My younger daughter got married and when we sold the house, we parted ways. Yes, I was disappointed, but I am learning to live with the solitude. It isn't too bad (smile).

The Oakland I once knew has changed a lot. West Oakland, 26 years ago, was a lot blacker. There were black people who owned their homes and when I rode my bike or walked around, I'd see others who looked like me on the streets too. I didn't see a lot of police and that was okay.

The internally displaced persons living under freeways and in ditches and behind stores like Target in Emeryville are a new phenomenon. I remember the first time I saw all the tents lined up on San Pablo and West Grand Avenue last year on my way to an African Diaspora Bazaar. I was floored. Since when is being internally displaced normalized to the point that there is living room furniture set up for entertaining guests?

When I got out of the car to talk to the people this year on Monday, January 4, I just couldn't. What could I say? How could I bring a bit of sunshine to these chilly streets, wet with a brisk wind-chill factor?

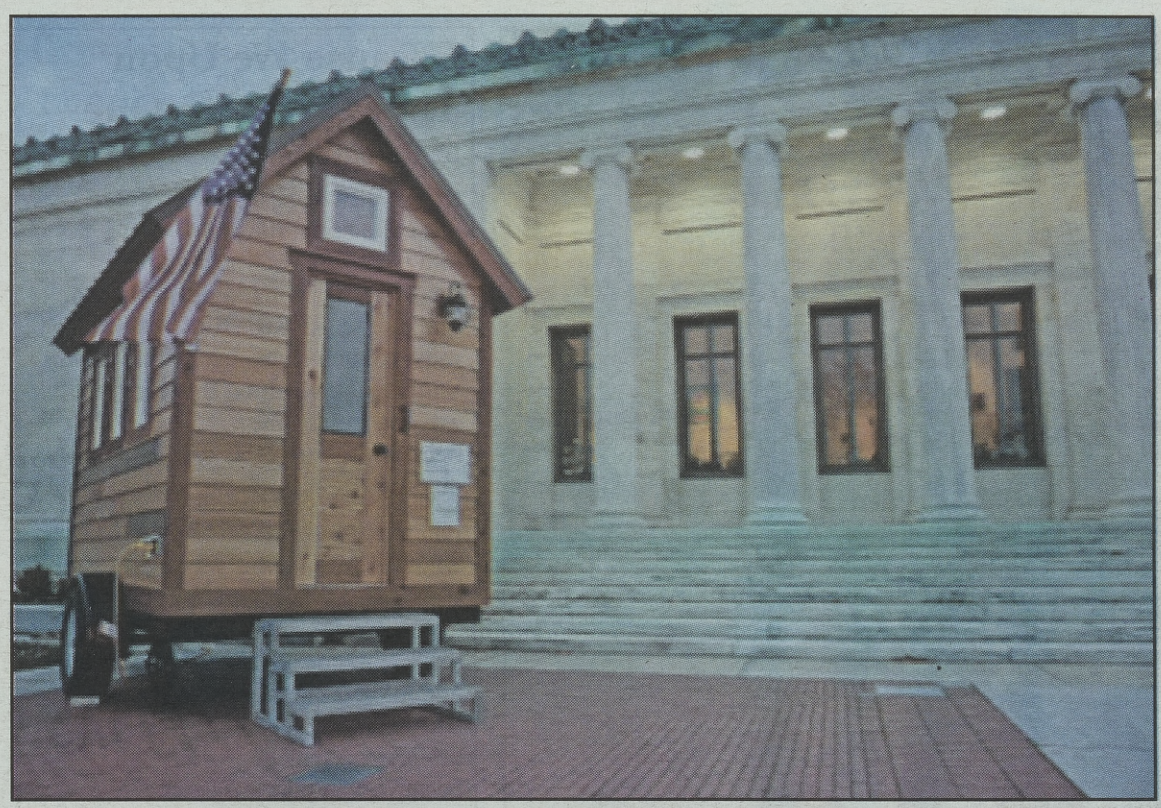
At another spot where I knew a few of the residents, I got out and walked around, checking in to see how people were. I like to go by once a week to see how people are. Some people are getting housing, others are making the situation work. Two women were hospitalized. One woman I'd met, died.

It would be easier if there was a bit more assistance like garbage disposal for illegal dumping, and access to toilet facilities and places to shower and wash clothes. If St. Vincent de Paul is the nearest place to wash up and do laundry for free, and they are closed on Monday, it might take all day to do this.

This year on Tuesday, January 5, 2016, at the Oakland City Council meeting, a Shelter Crisis Ordinance was adopted by the council. This means that City property like the Lake Merritt Garden Center can be turned into temporary shelter for those in need of such. Council person Desley Woods recommended that the Garden Center be ready to go in 15 days. Its 200 beds will not serve the entire displaced community, but it would be a start.

We could see the bureaucratic wheels turning slowly as the City Attorney spoke about agenda items and procedures, while people are freezing on the streets of

See **Reflections on Homelessness** *page 7*



The Toledo Museum of Art commissioned a Tiny House as part of its 2012 Small Worlds exhibition. Photo © Toledo Museum of Art, Andrew Weber Photography.

The tiny home of Elaine Walker is located at former Boneyard Studios in Washington, D.C.

Tiny Houses: *A New Vision of Home*

"I hope it's the beginning of an upswell of community support to get this tiny homes program under way in Berkeley. It seems that there is a possibility we can do that."

from page 1

organizer. He brought up the idea and homeless adults from Liberty City came on board and wanted to be involved and then people from Dorothy Day House and from ACLU and YSA got involved. Homeless youth have been very interested and came right from the beginning."

"There was a lot of enthusiasm," and a second meeting was set, she said. I joined about 30 people at the second meeting on February 17 at Youth Spirit Artworks. It was an interesting and productive meeting. (I attended that meeting as a reporter and found myself joining a working group.)

The meeting began with a talk and slide show by Betsy Morris, a city planner and consultant who, in recent years, has become interested in tiny house communities. She showed a set of slides displaying a variety of styles of tiny houses, from a traditional little wooden house with a front porch to a dramatic spaceship, an upside-down cup, and a miniaturize version of a modern sculpture.

Morris described some existing communities, focusing on the concept of community and on issues of governance. Some communities are run by churches or nonprofit organizations.

After her presentation, there was a lively and wide-ranging discussion among what was a very diverse group of participants. There were young people and older people who are homeless temporarily or by choice, as well as housed people who are interested and active in political and social issues.

Different ideas and needs were examined in a discussion of concepts of governance, community, need for privacy and other issues. In her talk, Betsy Morris had expressed a strong preference for self-governing communities, but not everyone agreed.

There was also much discussion and planning around practical issues. Research needs to be carried out on size and space requirements in building codes. These codes can vary from city to city, and regulate everything from minimum size of a dwelling to necessary amenities and utilities. A list needs to be compiled of city properties and of private properties that could be sites for the communities.

Connections with Berkeley City Council members and officials were explored. Committees were set up to carry out this work, hopefully by the next meeting in three weeks. Mike Lee, advocate and organizer of the project, put out the message loud and strong: "There's been a lot of time, a lot of talk, it's time for action!"

In the days after the meeting, I talked with several people to get a sense of how they felt about the project. I had signed up to be on a committee with J.P. Nasser to research governance practices in existing tiny house communities. He is a retired computer programmer, and has been politically active for years.

Nasser told me he has been concerned about the housing crisis and has known about and been interested in tiny houses for a long time. Talking about this day's meeting he said, "I hope it's the beginning of an upswell of community support to get this tiny homes program under way in Berkeley. And it seems that there is a possibility we can do that."

Twenty-four-year-old Dana Minton is training for a staff position at Youth Spirit Artworks. "At first," he said, "I thought it was a pretty bad idea, like tiny houses don't have proper living space."

Referring to the first meeting, Minton said, "teams were divided on what research needs to be done, like where are we going to put it, how it gets done, get legal research on this and where are we going from here." Since then, he has learned more details and had some questions answered, and by the end of this second meeting, he says, "I'm getting pretty optimistic about the project."

He was particularly concerned about the small size but thinks 220 square feet — apparently the minimum size required — would be OK.

"I don't think it's going to be too upsetting for an individual that lives in that little space," Minton observed. "I have some experience with small spaces. Yeah, I'm kind of on board with what they have to say."

Hindman had suggested I talk to Zef. When I came to YSA, he was deeply engrossed in painting a picture. I looked over his shoulder. It was a picture of a tree with the top and all its limbs cut short. Around the trunk near the top, Zef had painted a light brown substance that might have been sap. "The tree is crying," the words came unbidden from my mouth. "Yes," he said.

Zef had moved here from Seattle two months ago and is currently staying at the YEAH shelter. A talented artist and musician, he hopes to be able to have his own apartment. "I don't like being homeless," he said. "I've been homeless before. It's not a sustainable way of living at all.... I was more involved in a life of crime when I was homeless because you really don't have anything to lose and you're desperate for everything, when you're just so hungry, just so thirsty."

"I like it here in Berkeley," he said. "Berkeley feels like one of the safest cities in America compared to Seattle. I know that crime in the city goes down if you have a sense of accountability.

:And housing, having something to come back to at the end of the day, gives you a sense of accountability to the community, to friends, and that's going to be an impact to the safety of the community over all — affecting all ages from children to old folks."

He has been involved in the tiny houses project since it started. It is "a great idea," he said. "To have solar energy, sustainable energy, clean water and security is going to be important. YSA has a lot of people that are interested in working on this project — a whole team is interested in seeing this through."

The third meeting to plan the community of little houses for the homeless takes place March 2. While the city tries to pass more laws against the homeless, the people who care are determined to act.

Reflections on Homelessness in Oakland

from page 6

Oakland. With the pending storms only getting worse, what does the City have in mind for those without permanent shelter?

On January 19 at the City Council meeting, after waiting three hours for the housing item to be addressed, the Garden Center idea was put on hold — no funds. The day after Martin Luther King Day, his legacy is at a stalemate, this despite the Oakland Citizen Humanitarian Award to Alex McElree, executive director and founder, Operation Dignity 2016.

Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf awarded McElree the award just two days prior, January 17, at the "In the Name of Love: 14th Annual Musical Tribute Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."

If people know their history, then Martin Luther King's Poor People's March on Washington, completed after his death, has not resulted in an American society where all citizens matter, especially black men, the majority of men seen on Oakland streets.

As the discussion about the Shelter Crisis Ordinance continued on January 19, City Council members checked the speakers list, and with 24 signed up to speak, our time was reduced to 1 minute each. I was so angry I could barely speak. Such disrespect! Their conversation and banter did not indicate any urgency, despite the label "housing crisis."

Dr. King stated, "The time is always right to do right." King declared, "There comes a time when silence is betrayal." He said that sometimes what is legal is not just. Everything Hitler did was within the law. Closer at home, black people are still recovering from legislative lynchings.

King said, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" Doing the right thing takes courage. Desley Brooks proposed immediate response to the homeless crisis on January 4 and her proposal was sent to committee. On January 19, she again asked for an immediate action, and voted for $500,000 to address the Housing Crisis, rather than the $180,000 (or so) proposed. And once again she was silenced.

"On some positions," King reminded us, "cowardice asks the question, is it expedient? And then expedience comes along and asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? Conscience asks the question, is it right?

"There comes a time when one must take the position that is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but [she] must do it because conscience tells [her] it is right."

My mind went to È_ú-Elégbá and how this deity was thrown on the trash heap and there became the friend of the hobo or homeless person. È_ú-Elégbá is the keeper of ashay, or the life force. When Obátálá took clay to make the human being, it was È_ú-Elégbá made the form animate.

His totem is the rat, the scavenger who knows how to survive in the harshest circumstances. In the Chinese Zodiac, the rat is clever, sturdy, perhaps not the most pleasant all the time to hang out with, but then, if you have seen what it has seen or been where it has been, foolishness and hesitation, where direct action is necessary, is not something it has time for.

Bag Lady

by Eileen Hugo

Days filled with clutter
dragging bags, begging dollars
days break, time lags.
Night after frightening night
cold, thieves and predators
roam lonely subway stairwells.
Her urine scented fortress
corners her, covers her back.
Punks laugh, urban bandits ignore
then threaten with their violent stare.
"You looking at me?"
She would smile as
polished suburban couples
hold their breaths, look through her
of course they didn't know her.
But she knew them,
knew that life.
Clutter filled her days
dragging herself from meeting to
meeting, shepherding her possessions.
Token plastic wife
brought low nightly.
Never good enough.
"Yes, doctor I fell again;
I fall a lot. "
Then she fell too far
and never went back.

Abuse Of Power

by George Wynn

Under a downtown awning
after he shakes off the
drops of rain I hand him
my cup of coffee, "Whew,
thanks," he smiles. "Good
to see a friendly face."
After a hearty sip, he tells
me he recites a prayer each morning.
"Oh God, please not another
day of confrontation from
the hasslers of homeless
people." He shakes his head,
"The bastards start out babbling,
then they wants to crush you. I'm
talkin' 'bout anybody with a little
power and authority. Yeah, the
bastards get to me sometimes...
most of the time I keeps my senses."
With a tip of the hat, "Man, that was
good coffee."

"The Bag Lady." A heroine on the street.

"The Bag Lady." Art by Arnold White

The late Oakland artist Arnold White said: *"The Bag Lady* piece is my statement about homeless people. I think society really doesn't want to see the situation. They turn their back. Why in this country with the potential for so much greatness should people live in the streets and eat from garbage cans?"

Room

by Don Hagelberg

Off the streets
In a single room
Of an occupied hotel
I am still considered
Homeless by those
Who law up the rights
Of those of us
Who do not care to vote.

Life in the City by the Bay

by Lark Omura

In the city by the bay, housing prices are at an all time high.
Old slums disappeared with those who once thrived there,
unable to afford the sparkling blue Pacific any longer.
In their place, gold-buckled briefcases line up for coffee and turkey wraps,
spend lunch hours watching seagulls fight over the crumbs.
At a table, men with loud voices plan another tall building,
best views of the city kept for those on hundredth floors.

In the city by the bay, cardboard cots blend in easy with dirt on the street.
Evening laughter cuts through the cold air, steps over sleeping bodies
on its way to the bar, smelling like cologne, overpowering the scent of
hot urine rising from the asphalt, showerless teens in strangers' clothes,
singsong babble of the mad and the dying, with their frantic shouts at no one,
their bare shoulders in the frigid night.

In the city by the bay, a party thrives at the Ritz.
Blondes drip in gems, hang from elbows of financial planners.
Champagne spills, oysters rest on salt beds singing congratulatory songs.
Suited guards hold heavy hotel doors and coats. Outside, it is cold.
A man scarred by many wars curls his sleeping bag over his toes,
shrinks into the cold corners of concrete.

In the city by the bay, invisible people line the sidewalks.
They whisper soundless prayers and hymns.
Shoeboxes become handwritten signs, pleas and psalms in a straggled row.
Vietnam Vet. Homeless and Hungry. Anything Helps. God Bless You.
Shining loafers stroll by, heading to a meeting. Never stopping
for the writing on the thousand paper walls.

In the city by the bay, storefronts shine like crystal.
Red leather handbags sit on pedestals under spotlights, crowds stare.
A woman selling papers looks in as she shuffles by,
her deeply grooved face reflected back at no one
but herself.

Eighteen and Stuck in a Women's Shelter

by George Wynn

Night
The lights go out
Noisy, dark
My feelings so intense
The fear of being robbed
so real
My sadness comes to
my eyes
I kinda understand why
some of the women
turn to crack or smack

Before the lights went out
I wrote in my diary:
One woman read a poem
to me about dying to kick
She swears she can lick
the demon
She'll be glad to get treatment
but she's so damn mad
she can't get in a program

A spike haired tattooed
tough tried to bully me
I grew up on the rings
and like doing double
somersaults with a full pike
so I gave her that look: Don't
make me jump all over you

The lady with arthritis in her
hands — she's real nice —
told me not to be ashamed
to be here and that warmed
my heart when she said that
Her face delicate like my
mother who died last year.

Because We Upon This Earth Are One

by Carol Denney

the wealthy here on earth cannot
afford to scorn the poor
and not for fear of bringing
forth the wrath from heaven's door
and not because the first of stones
must come from someone free of sins
but because we upon this earth
are one we are one
because we upon this earth
are one

no man of wealth can truly know
what favor came his way
what fortune was an effort that
his birthright might betray
misfortune in some lives is spared
and all good fortune best is shared
because we upon this earth
are one we are one
because we upon this earth
are one

no man of wealth can cast an eye
on others in disdain
while knowing nothing of their lives
their stories and their pain
an open ear can always chart
the distance from an open heart
because we upon this earth
are one we are one
because we upon this earth
are one

Trash

by Claire Booker

When some wag asked
where he got his ideas,

Chekhov gleamed,
picked up a busy ashtray –
See! Stories. I let the ash speak.

I think of this when I spot
gum
singed foil
a baby shoe
beneath a bench

or pass a placard
Everything Must Go!
held by a beard
and two shut-down eyes.

Homeless People Are Everywhere!

by George Wynn

A long legged woman
with bags from Bloomingdale's
and Nieman Marcus
which will make
her a tad
more gorgeous
turns to her equally
gorgeous woman
friend on Market Street,
"I am so mad.
They're everywhere!"
Her friend nods.
"Homeless people
are an abomination."

They near a gray
haired woman in
a wheelchair with
a big paper cup
in her outstretched
hand in front of a
shuttered store.
They stop to stare
not to give
to her chagrin.
"I've been sick
for six whole months.
"You ladies look
so beautiful.
Just like people
who never pay
their dues."

Convince All the Poets They're Crazy

by Carol Denney

convince all the poets they're crazy
convince them they never will fly
it's a bird it's a plane it's delusion
sit down and shut up and then die
be impressed with the man with the money
clap your hands when he waves it around
dance without moving a muscle
sing without making a sound

tell all the artists they're crazy
tell them they're sick and on fire
tell the poets that nobody's listening
they're a fake and a fraud and a liar
convince everybody they're worthless
they'll never catch on or get by
convince all the children they're ugly
and tell them it's hopeless to tr

tell all of the artists it's over
it's embarrassing they didn't know
it's a pointless dead end of a journey
and the funeral was years ago
there were bouquets of flowers and speeches
it was really a beautiful day
it would help if they'd pick up the pieces
and just maybe get out of the way

A startling image of life on the street, one of the revealing photos in Dong Lin's book, *One American Reality*. Dong Lin photo

Sojourners

— for Lisa, Sandy and Baby

by Joan Clair

Three sojourners stand on a street
in Berkeley, a woman and her two dogs.
The woman tells me they walked miles
from Richmond, from their tent home there,
to find a good place, a good space,
to give and receive God's grace.

The dogs bark, but the woman answers me
they have never harmed anybody.
The little dog licks my face,
and the big dog presses against my leg.

I put some coins in the collection plate.
The church is the street we're on
where the sermon is unspoken.
Together we complete
a circle of love, unbroken.

Sonnet Without A Home

by Don Hagelberg

First the curl of the camouflage sleeping bag
eats its way straight out into the sidewalk.
Then the woven stainless steel bars
of the shopping cart barriers itself
in such a way as to protect the long ago
sweat and drink of the eyes incarcerated
by plain sight. Homeless is the soul who
has no doorwell in which to camp complete;
Homeless is the soul who has no coins fit
to pass to a shirtless monologue of a comrade;
Homeless is the soul who has no sleep
to invest in the days of bodiless voices,
which pass by his frozen-to-the-core ears.
Homeless are the souls slapped mentally ill.

TAX DAY

by Leah Mueller

I don't want to live off the grid
with a huddle of livestock
in a tar paper shack with solar panels
and so I pay the price
for civilization.
I wish there was a place I loved
so much that cost was no object,
but all of it is just drudgery,
receiving with one hand,
and then giving everything away
willingly, like a good citizen.
Anger is useless,
anger is being their bitch
sickening yourself
so you end up having to ask them for help —
but they'll find you eventually
even if you hide on a dirt road in the woods,
and they'll only work you over harder
if you protest.

Invisible Man Revisited

by George Wynn

In the church
on the well-to-do
side of town
there were six
white table-clothed
tables for the social hour

In the back table
dressed in a dapper
brown suit, tie
and matching
shined shoes
sat a gray haired
man with big ebony
hands, strong and
knowing it like a man
who used to fight

No one shook his hand
No one smiled at him
No one spoke to him

Lonely as a stranger
in a strange land
he looked at his
pocket watch
then got up to
sign the comment
book: The mass
and light meal was fine
Alas, I grapple with one
thing that really does sting:
Is Monday through Saturday
as segregated as Sunday
in your church?

Growing Old in the Tenderloin

by George Wynn

Lonely for friendship
on this rainy night
the poet in the S.R.O
with no desire to versify
goes on reading
to distract himself
from all the sadness
in the City brought
on by the sight
of more and more
poor and homeless
folks and other things
he sees on the street
and transit stations
knowing only
last year he was
one of those people.

San Francisco New Year 2016

by George Wynn

Every year City Hall
promises to fix
the broken reality
of chronic homeless
folks who sleep
where they fall
and the progress
(if you're an optimist
of optimists) is
slow, slow, slow!

Every year the
skyline looks
more colorful more
like Manhattan
than San Francisco
the building boom
is fast, fast, fast
neglecting the real
world and the non-colorful
lives down below

If you ask the folks
who sleep and weep
where they fall
they tell you
"Same damn streets,
same damn thing
every night, nothing's
changed!"

Cornered

by Don Hagelberg

When you pass me by…
As I sprawl at that corner
Where the stop light
Blinks "10," "9," "8," "7,"…
It also looks at me
In a tint which
Discounts my soul.
I am high this morning
Or am I mentally in my illness?
Both, discounter…
Without a morning bath
Without clean clothes,
Without decent sleep
Deprived of all that by
Those more addicted than I
For something to steal and sell.
I take your place, here,
Cornered in the margins of breath,
Sent here by those
Who have the power to send
Those with the stigma of the brain
To the street corners of hell.

Without a Sole to My Name

by Don Hagelberg

Brown sheets of
Corrugated cardboard
Sandwich my bed
Spread in daylight
On the sidewalk
Of my home on this street.

I sleep during the day
Because in the night
Gangs of thieves
Will steal the "goods"
Of those who sleep
On the cold street.

During the night
I walk or pace
In broad circles
Around the edges
Of those places
At which I sleep by day.

All has gone well
Until last Tuesday
For in the daylight
While I slept
Someone stole my shoes
And left me soleless.

Till Every Tear Is Dried

by Judy Joy Jones

till every tear is dried
begging god most high
fly the poor on earth
straight thru
heaven's doors

may your heavenly light
shine ever so bright
on those the world
refuses to see

souls with no home
are your cherished own
exalting them forever
in the book of life

till every tear is dried
begging god most high
fly the poor on earth
straight thru
heaven's doors

may they
suffer no more
suffer no more

amen

In Berkeley

by Claire J. Baker

Anthropologists study
street people, find them
humane, kindly, humble —
a dog in lap, parrot on a
shoulder, a young man
sleeping, curled like a baby.
A raggedy baseball cap
silvered with small coins.

Passing poets wonder:
Is it unlawful to be human?
But lawful to be inhumane?

Juke Box Bonner, Blues Musician, Ghetto Poet

(1932-1978)

by Claire J. Baker

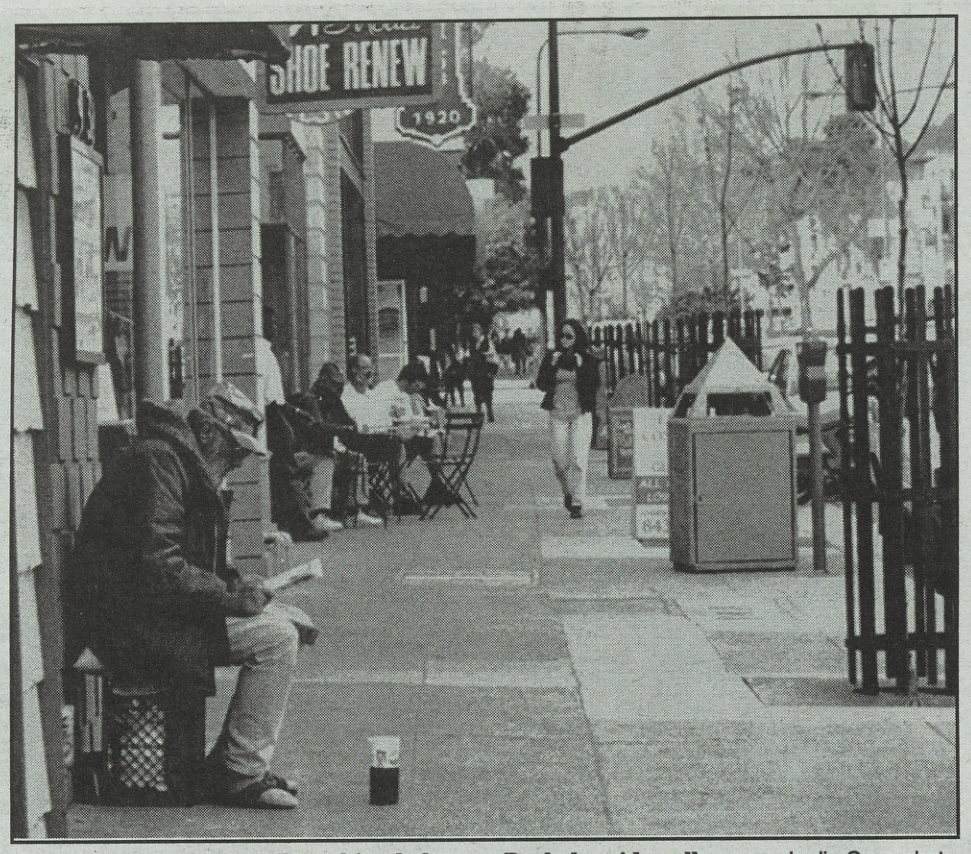
"It don't take too muh"
when you ain't got nothing
to keep you on your feet.

Not booked enough to make it,
not bold enough to fake it
I go to work in a bloody
Houston chicken plant
processing chicken parts..
My heart goes numb.
I've only got one heart
and just two thumbs.

Working the line,
I can't afford to flee.
But won't let chickens
make a "chicken" out of me.

Lord, O Lord, there are true
falses and false trues,
I answered the call
to follow the "blues."
Didn't live long.
But did what I longed to do.
How 'bout you?

(From Street Spirit article, "The Blues and Social Justice")



A man waits quietly while seeking help on a Berkeley sidewalk. Lydia Gans photo

Gentle Little Pushes

by Ed Coletti

Lying still
in the garden

warfare —
the notion
absurd.

Give everyone
a garden
breeze and swing

especially
executive
owners

of gardens and swings.
Lead them outside,
give them gentle

little pushes
start them all
moving —

forgetting all else,
being alone.

Sleeping in My Tesla

by C. Denney & P. Fahey

well I'm sleeping in my Tesla
ain't got nowhere to go
sleeping in my Tesla
ain't got nowhere to go
there's a lot of us in Teslas
down here on Santana Row

I went down to the city council
I just had to speak my mind
I went down to the city council
I just had to speak my mind
I was looking for some answers
but there was nothing there to find

they ticketed my Tesla
got boots on every tire
they ticketed my Tesla
got boots on every tire
there's a lot of us with boots on
rocking boots is catching fire

Silicon Valley got a problem
got one equation they can't do
Silicon Valley got a problem
got one equation they can't do
they cannot solve for housing
living in their Teslas too

well I'm sleeping in my Tesla
and I'm charging up my phone
well I'm sleeping in my Tesla
and I'm charging up my phone
cause when I'm feeling lonely
I listen to the dial tone

Stoplight

by Lark Omura

On the stage of a concrete median, the kid,
eyes brown and jumpy, struggles to rise.
Pushes up slow off his milk crate stool
Legs shaky, stride twisted.
Left leg chasing the right,
chasing the right,
in a slow drag.

Up ahead, an arm out the window of a silver car
holds a plastic to-go container,
in our breath of a red light
we, the drivers, watch
his walk, a battle against time.
On his cardboard sign
MARINE/ Disabled in IRAQ
pops in white strokes
against grainy brown.

The kid moves back to his crate on the median
and the driver of the silver car continues to speak
to him, gestures an idea into the air.
The kids eyes catch in that direction
then he cracks a smile
which makes him look even younger,
and more human in the way we are used to.

The light turns green.

LOSERS

by Tiziana Soverino

Here's to all those individuals
who bring other people down,
who think themselves superior,
who look down on others,
claiming they are better.
Where does their bitterness come from?
Were they conceived out of hatred,
rape and bitterness, in the brutalisation
of the supreme, ultimate act of love?
Or were they neglected by their parents,
perhaps being raised by a mother
who lacked the slightest spark of maternal instinct,
or by an absent father, devoted to alcoholism
and other, more interesting, pursuits?
Were they bullied as children,
or simply lack emotional intelligence,
and so took refuge in a workaholic existence,
believing that was a quick fix,
a magic wand which solves all the problems,
and fills all those gaps?
Do they fill up their loneliness with
laptops, meetings, books?
Aren't they deluded?
Do they get a high
out of the insults, pain and sorrow,
they inflict on others?
How can they sleep at night?
Or look at themselves in the mirror
and think they are better
than anyone else?
No title, award, or earthly success
entitles somebody
to humiliate others,
to bring them down,
to fail to recognise
the soul, the potential
in the other individual,
or how we are all connected.
They may be rich and famous,
but those people
are the biggest losers of all.

Hearing the Blues

by Julia Vinograd

A blues harp bends the broken-hearted hurtin' horizon
between both hands, trembling.
There's a long distance call between lips coming close
for a kiss.
A naked woman lies down on a honky-tonk piano
long hair dangling,
the keys beat at her breasts
but only the piano moans, not her.
A blues fiddle so fast it hopscotches over hell
and kiss my smoke.
Blues plants pain like a field of corn
and sets us up as scarecrows
but we only scare each other.
Blues so open
I can take a tropical canoe ride in my own ear
and stretch out like a sunbathing lizard.
A blues saxophone blows what rain wants to be
when it grows up.
Blues calls for lost keys,
lost socks, lost cigarettes, lost love.
Blues has empty pockets full of shooting stars
as wars go on overhead, ignored.
Blues mourns for being born,
then pushes the sky aside
as sparks fly upwards
and we follow.

Who Is Donald Trump

by Julia Vinograd

Of course, he's not just Donald Trump
he's the last trump. There's a sense of recognition
while we wait for him to take a battered old horn
from a thousand dollar suit, shout "you're fired" at us
and then blow the world down.
He whips the 4 horsemen over our heads
and everything he says came from our minds to him
like coins to a wishing well.
He's the last trump,
the graves will open
and the dead will vote for him.

Shepherd

by Ed Coletti

This guy 30 or so
in a red plaid mackinaw
pulls up curbside
in the rain by the rescue mission.
Someone on a decrepit bicycle
yells, "Hey Speedy!"
Everyone in the old gray Dodge gapes
but the passing cyclist aims
elsewhere while the deliberate driver
gets out to open his trunk,
grabs an aging umbrella, covers as much
of his dependent trio as he can
and calmly herds them
into lunch.

Ever find yourself
wondering who has the right
to live, whose lives are worth
something, why so many are mortified by
the death of a cat?
Why my demented 93-year-old parents continue
to live?

Then there's this thirty-year-old
who from this perspective,
still a messy kid,
is caring for three profoundly
damaged young men his own
age who
without him would
drown, freeze,
disappear —
entirely.

THE HOMELESS...

by Ava Bird

I have so many mixed feelings
about homeless people
and the deeper repercussions
of free enterprise:
suits and ties
disguised
as narcissistic,
ME first!
vultures
pecking away at our culture.
I must say though,
about the homeless...
that more and more
I see them camping,
napping in the doorways of the banks,
banks like:
Skank of America, Chase & Wells Fargo,
well, fuck you and go!
these gangsters of money
known as banksters.
Sleeping with
pranksters like at&t
spying on you & me!
More and more,
I see homeless people
on cellphones
with funny ringtones,
sleeping in no parking zones
moaning for a few bones
begging for a free loan,
or maybe
they just want the cops to leave them alone.
These homeless and their carts,
Pushing and pulling around a life savings,
Sometimes they scare me, to be honest.
The clothes they wear, the smells they bear,
sometimes they tear my heart apart,
to see someone else's life so torn apart.
A lot of them are really smart,
with warts, and all,
and kind hearts
but lets not get started
on the homeless problem!
the homeless burden!
it's just capitalism flirting!
....OUCH!
ITS HURTING!!!

"Just Say No to the Violence of War!" Women demonstrate for peace on the Golden Gate Bridge. Carol Harvey photo

PEACE VIGIL

Alameda City Hall Steps

by Mary Rudge

Our faces shine in the dark lit
by candles. We want to show you
another way, give the face of peace
where darkness looms,

out of the shudder of war, children
who went to fight, to blink on a light
you can find your way home safe by.

Oh, we stand here, we do not move,
but we are leading.

All over the globe
one by one lights go on
in minds where never before were
words, "*Yes, there is a way to peace,*
we can find it, no more war." Hold
the candles for a closer look,
give the face of peace to the world.

Televised Coverage

by Don Hagelberg

I brood on Television's offspring:
a Killer-Thriller grows.
A Veteran dies;
police shoot their job.
His tattoo surrenders
"Afghanistan," while
another Soldier,
pre-dating him
dies in battle. A
green sprout sprayed
brown with Agent-
Orange, snaps-down his crop.
Will we have a
climate-change, to
non-violent death for all,
to take precedence before
mass heart-beats, explode,
attacked dead with poison war?

Passports

by Rose Mary Boehm

He looks at my face
stamps my passport.
Yes Sir, I know I am a fraud.
Pardon me? Oh, of course.
I was born in dark times
in a place of horror.
No Sir, I didn't. I changed
my nationality for love.
Was he worth it?
I am not sure I follow, Sir.
Love for my children.
We couldn't go through
different doors. And then
I ask myself, now that you
brought it up: will any man
ever be worth the sacrifice?
I lived through dark times,
in places of horror. And often
wondered whether I would
become transparent.

Prisoners

by Rose Mary Boehm

On his way home,
he passes the bank and hears her keening.
Drunk again. What's the AA for?
He tosses the imaginary
coin. Who pays for her losses.

The last one must have left her used up. Gin
has no mercy. You see her at the bank corner
where cash is dispensed,
where the card-board boxes worry
her to sleep, a charity bottle
on cold marble. Thick grey serpents
undulate from her holey felt hat.

Once she sped past the charity shop
window. Eight-inch heels, almost a
skirt. To meet a new lover perhaps.
He remembers that.

DARWINISM

by Leah Mueller

Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom
was my favorite television program
for a brief time during my childhood
I loved watching lions attacking antelope and
bringing the carcasses home to their families
and my parents always said,
"That's the way it is in the wild.
Eat or be eaten." This made sense,
but I dreaded the commercials,
which suggested that death could come to us
as well, at any time,
leaving our loved ones without any security.
Many years later,
I still have no insurance,
and my loved ones have no security.
That's the way it is in the wild.

Phone Numbers of the Dead

by Julia Vinograd

Half the phone numbers in my notebook
belong to dead people. I can't cross them out.
I hear their wild voices on answering machines
and I know they're dead
but I can't hear their voices anywhere else.
This one chewed his beard when he growled
and that one used giggles for punctuation
with pauses for lighting a cigarette
and it's all on the machines.
The phone ad reads "reach out and touch someone,"
I can't do that but I can reach out and listen
till someone else gets their numbers
and they're evicted from my city of the dead.
They were often evicted when alive
for blowing the rent money on drugs
or causing a large untidy disturbance
trying to pick God's pockets and getting indignant
because God didn't have pockets.
Or gently and sweetly winding up in a nuthouse
minding only the no smoking rules on the wards.
Or a guy who died because he couldn't believe he was sick,
he was looking for a joke on Death
but Death wasn't laughing.
Or a friend who had no address or phone number
he just crashed with various people
and I called their numbers
till I tracked him down. Or not. Not anymore.
I haven't crossed his contact numbers out
and they're not even dead.
All these numbers in my notebook.
They might be jailhouse numbers,
some of them did time and wrote poems about it.
I've lifted a pen to cross out their names
a dozen times.
I know they're dead.
I can't change it.
But always, always I put my pen down,
I just can't let them go.

He Was on the Street

by Julia Vinograd

He was on the street sparechanging
for a pair of wings.
He was dressed in scars and bars
that didn't lock him in anymore.
There'd been a girl but she'd left him
with a wound in a shiny new car.
He was on the street, the street signs pointed at him
and him alone.
He was young in a way that made people angry
and yes, he did it on purpose.
Black hair needed washing, still too many fingers
caught in his curls.
Sparechanging for a pair of wings,
an angel or an albatross, he didn't care
neither did his knife.
People crossed the street to avoid him, then looked back;
he was still there.
A fire hydrant huddled at his feet
like a dog about to bite.
If he got the wings?
He might just trample them underfoot.
He'd torn up the sky with all other maps
long ago.

Military Price Tag

by Jim Lee

"Freedom isn't free."
Former GI Gina muttered the cliché and sighed.
Then she turned her head, beheld
the still-new prosthetic legs beside her hospital bed.
"Not free," she repeated herself without irony
or even too-much bitterness.
"But who gets to set the going rate
and who to judge whether the cost is reasonable or not?"
No answer forthcoming, Gina sighed again
and closed her eyes.

Blood of the Homeless

by Robin Merfeld

The blood-soaked pillow
of a homeless man who used
concrete streets for his bed
died in the night.

I didn't know you my Precious Friend,
but I'll carry on the flame
in honor of your life.
You did not live in vain.

May I carve the name
of this unknown Poet
in the Book of Life.
You will be known as my
eternal brother,
forever more.

"To My Friend Kin"

I AM HERE

by Wilma Brown

Being homeless is not a good feeling.
It is tiring, confusing, and sometimes
it makes you just not care for yourself;
I know at times I don't.
I am tired, sleepy, and hungry.
I know you care,
about me.
I am homeless.
But where are you?
You say, "Let me help you."
So here I am standing right
In Your FACE.

The Wheelchair Jogger

by Claire J. Baker

On a dusty track in total
sunlight, wearing sky-blue
warm-up suit and running shoes,
low in her chair, head bent,
lips tightened, stunted arms
pulling hard, slowly she rolls
around the track, counting
one by one the laps.

Young college sprinters
gazelle beyond her snail pace
like wind. Yet they realize
how hard she pulls.
Runners who look back
(as if to wish her a good run)
tend to lighten her arms
and their own legs.

My Journey with Mother Teresa

by Judy Joy Jones

Mother Teresa
opened my heart
to God Most High

With golden wings
upon my feet
i sailed thru the sky
following a saint
wherever she did lead

Mother Teresa
cradled the poor
on earths shores
helping them
die with great dignity

When no screams
echo in the night
from babies
dying of
hunger and fright
my journey
will be through

Mother Teresa
opened my heart
to God Most High

A blazing flame
of divine love was she
the saint who lived and died
for the poorest of the poor
Amen

"A Need for Advocacy." Guitar Whitfield took this photo of a homeless man in Oakland. "I want everyone to have a decent life in America," Guitar said. "People are running around hungry and homeless. People need to help one another." His photo is part of "On Our Way Home," an inspiring exhibit on homelessness in Oakland by formerly homeless artists at St. Mary's Center.

The Nature of Things

by Henry Whitmore

The geese fly in a group with a leader.
They must have a leader — this is nature.
If the leader gets shot the others lose their way.
They do not know where to go because they
have not made this trip before.
The lead goose knows the way.
Martin Luther King, Malcom X, JFK—took the lead
to help the people. They were a symbol, a purpose,
to help the people to a necessary destiny—better living.
When they were killed, the people disassembled
like the geese. They lost hope, direction —
they became depressed, discombobulated.
I say what if you grew up like I did.
I loved Martin Luther King, Malcom X, and JFK.
I just froze when they were killed.
My forward reach, my mind expansion, gone.
I lost my direction like the geese.
There's a deep down depression.
I don't want to revision this concept of a better way.
I could not put the same energy, trust, faith into it.

I Love This Place

by Robin Merfeld

I finally walked through the right door.
I have walked through a lot of doors that
closed and made me want to give up.
It's all about not giving up on yourself.
I had given up on myself and now everything
is falling into place, like a miracle.
My caseworker has great listening ears.

When I was on the street, no hope for me.
I didn't care if I lived or died.
It truly has been good for me from day one
to be at St. May's Center.
I'm going to be here until the last day of
the Winter Shelter, unless they find me
housing before then.
Now I have every confidence
in achieving my goals.

Silence

by John Castillo

Like the silent falling of a single raindrop
becoming and multiplying into a raging force
that will eventually move great objects:
all our hopes and dreams
become focused with that
power to accomplish great things.

The Gift

by J. Fernandez

The woman with the silver hair, worn and frail, sits at her window and sees everything, all the time listening to the blind and homeless harmonica man play the blues in the rain, bursting with the wild-eyed colors of a love-hungry ghost, the shivering howl of an isolated human being. Now screaming, now whispering, now praying, "Lord, here I am. Here I am," while leaves stream down the street as silent and as indifferent as the world, except for the woman with the silver hair. She hears the plea and knows too well the silence and aloneness of aging, and responds with a gift of hope: "I'm here too, bluesman. I'm here too!"

If You're Homeless

by J. Fernandez

If you're homeless, blind with fear and sick down to your soles, broken down and so alone you want to crawl out of your skin and be someone else, somewhere else, look my way and know: I'm that voice that flows from your heart that says you're stronger and more than you know. That you're a dream still unfolding and turning in sweet pain towards the light.

Look my way and know, in your thoughts, your blood and nerve endings, I'm the fire that makes your soul shine. And that you're all of us — each of us — who struggles every day to find light in the darkness.

Look my way and know, most of all know, that you are and have always been and will always be the beloved.

Yeshua

by J. Fernandez

I woke to Jesus this morning. Kept me up half the night. Not the Jesus made in Hollywood. Not the one with manicured fingernails on my mother's living room wall. Not even the one in the Bible.

I'm talking about my Jesus: the dream-eyed, wooly haired, beautiful Palestinian Jew, the revolutionary we rarely hear about. The one born to Mary and Joseph in Nazareth by the sea of Galilee, who had a mysterious love for wood and words, who bled real tears and blood and healed real wounds, except his own. And who was so full of God, so powerful in God, that when he spoke, he was like no one before or after him.

Yes, I'm talking about the one, the only one known as Yeshua to his people, the one who cried love, spoke love, and who died for loving love, humiliated and tortured, nailed to a Roman cross.

And yet tonight, up and down centuries of blood, I hear his freedom song, and see hands holding up the sky calling his name:

Yeshua
Yeshua
Yeshua

So strong the poor oak table trembles and poets everywhere reach for the root of his song: words that flower and flow, and only grow. How they grow!